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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN DEP DEFENSE MINISTER OFFERS COMPROMISE ON
CBE 04

Classified By: Ambassador John Ordway for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Armenian Deputy Defense Minister Artur Aghabekian informed DAO March 11 that Armenia is planning to send three officers to Baku in September 2004 to participate in NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) exercise Cooperative Best Effort 04 (CBE 04). Aghabekian ruled out the possibility that Armenian officers would participate in the exercise as observers. End Summary.

12. (C) Deputy Defense Minister Artur Aghabekian told DAO that he is aware of the domestic pressures the Azerbaijani government faces in allowing Armenian military officers to participate in any activity in Baku. He noted that Armenia went through a similar process last year when Armenia hosted CBE 03. As a condition of hosting the exercise, Armenia had to consent to Turkish and Azerbaijani participation in the exercise. Although Azerbaijan declined to participate, Turkey sent a small contingent. Aghabekian said that most Armenians were opposed to the Turkish presence in Armenia, but the GOAM worked to convince the Armenian society that Turkish participation would not harm Armenian interests and could also provide political benefits. Aghabekian stated that he wants to see the Government of Azerbaijan begin to prepare its public for Armenian participation in CBE 04, and to reduce the anti-Armenian rhetoric in public discourse.

13. (C) Aghabekian stated that Armenia's interest in participating in CBE 04 is not to humiliate Azerbaijan for allowing Armenian military officers to participate in exercises in Baku. Armenia's objective is to pressure Azerbaijan to tone down the anti-Armenian rhetoric throughout Azerbaijani society. Aghabekian claimed that the current atmosphere does not allow for progress in negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh. He said Armenia would like to get to the point where Azerbaijani society considers Armenia an "opponent" rather than an "enemy" (Note. Aghabekian used the Russian words "protivnik" and "vrag", saying that one could work with an opponent but not with an enemy. End Note.) Aghabekian believes that this process had a beneficial effect on Armenian society last year during preparations for CBE 03 and would like to see a similar process occur in Azerbaijan this year.

14. (C) The GOAM continues to oppose sending the officers to Baku as observers rather than participants, since Armenia did not make such a demand on Turkey or Azerbaijan last year. GOAM officials argue that NATO should take an even-handed approach to the countries in the region. The MOD would like to incorporate the Armenian officers into NATO's exercise staff, which would limit the visibility of the Armenian presence.

15. (C) COMMENT: This proposal from the MOD appears to be the definitive response to the Azerbaijani offer of two observers. If it is feasible for the Armenians to participate as part of the exercise staff, it strikes us that this is an attractive compromise that will allow the GOAM to claim that it is "participating" while allowing the GOAJ to claim that no Armenian unit is participating in the exercise. The next steps appear to be (a) confirmation by NATO military authorities that three Armenians can be accommodated as part of the exercise staff, and (b) confirmation by Baku that this is an acceptable outcome. END COMMENT

ORDWAY